

# Tilling the Darkness

*poems by* Susan Braley

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Black ground worked up in the spring, all loam  
and vowel: a deeper language  
. . . . Dark matter turned  
to the understory light.

from "Plow"  
in *Ordinary Hours* by Karen Enns

## PREFACE

I was born into a family of eleven on 150 acres of clay-loam in Southern Ontario. This setting—the seasons vivid over the fields, birth and death sudden in the barn—honed my imagination from a young age. As the fourth child and the second-eldest daughter in this traditional Catholic home, I grew up quickly, charged with classic “women’s work” in the house, including child care. *Tilling the Darkness* explores how I navigated the inequities of gender roles on the farm and at church, and later in adulthood, and how I came to appreciate the complex, bountiful legacy of my early rural life.

Once you read the poems in *Tilling the Darkness*, they will be complete.

## Only One Round

The furrow behind his plough  
clean and true, ploughshares  
lifting at the moment  
fresh-till met the headland

My father, a cartographer.

His eyes warmed as I climbed up  
sat on the red fender  
wider than the length of my arm  
I reached over to grasp the edge of his seat

He didn't need to say  
*Only one round*  
it was too loud to talk anyhow

The tractor surged, bore down,  
guttural. Thrum of metal  
in the soles of my feet

The narrow head of the tractor  
pressed up the slope,  
like a lead horse, imperious  
through rubble and muck

I tightened my grip over bumps  
(Dad didn't reach over  
to steady me)  
he sat sideways, calm,  
eye on the plough

Thin discs slit the ground,  
shares carved deep into clay  
lifted the underside up

the furrow slices  
gleaming, dark  
earth pelts

On our return down the slope  
the field stretched acres-wide  
on either side, like the open-air  
theatre I'd seen in a book

black furrows on our left  
bleached stubble on our right  
like great banners laid down.

Gulls swooped

cried out, proprietary.  
Rogue wind in our faces  
clouds mounted high in the sky  
gun-powder grey, weighty

He dropped me off, a little smile,  
then his back *bank loans*  
mind likely churning *calf*  
*with pneumonia bank loans*  
The tractor roared on

The air so still

close to the ground

Along the furrow,  
curved mounds laid bare

I searched their seams for  
glass button, blue bottle, broken plate.

## **UNDERSTORY**

## The Hired Man

Beside the thick steers,  
his body looked wasted.  
Breath clouds hung  
in fetid air. Alone

in the bottom of the barn,  
he scraped muck from the pen.  
Hoof and boot sunk in sullied straw.  
Ankles pushing through treacle.

I watched him climb to the loft,  
the ladder's spine firm in his grip.  
I followed, soft-shoed,  
giddy in the dome of the mow.

The clean straw like the inverted bowl  
of a chalice. Chute to the steers' pen  
a shaft of light.

I gripped the ladder's highest rung.  
Straw gleamed in the hired man's arms.  
He moved to the chute, let go his load,  
leaned into the swirl of gold,  
and was gone.

I crept to the brink.  
He wasn't there, maimed or whole,  
only the cattle who stood together  
belly to belly. I climbed down.

He wasn't there.  
I looked the cattle in the eyes. Dark glass.  
Bits of yellow clung to their sides.

In the air above our heads,  
dust motes swirled.

## To Bring a Girl

My mother had three sons,  
one by one delivered in September.  
Just for Dad on New Year's Eve,  
three times in a row, she'd brandished  
an antique revolver, wore her Annie  
Get Your Gun costume. Sipped Yuletide punch.  
Last time, he'd even caught her on camera.  
Those three sons grew fast,  
and one by one, wandered off.

In the year before I came, she refused  
the Annie get-up.  
Nine months before my arrival,  
Mom lined her empty basket  
with an old skirt, apple-green, covered  
in trilliums (flowers too rare to pluck).

Took Dad to a local market, passed  
him Early Girl tomatoes, pressed  
the grassy scent of round-bottomed  
pears to his nose, tucked the violet  
oblong of eggplant into the crook  
of his elbow. They came home,  
the basket overflowing. That night,  
he gestured out the bedroom window. *Look,*  
he said, *the old moon is holding*  
*the new moon in its arms.*